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# Fifty Years of Immersive Art

Art and technology

Traditionally, visual art has been something you visit and look at. Picture the standard museum experience, with its white cubes with unadorned walls on which art is hung. But what about art that is immersive, where gallery goers are inside the piece?



Above: Es Devlin’s “Room 2022,” immersive installation in 2017 inside a Miami hotel. Credit: Eugene Gologursky/Getty Images for American Express Platinum

Earlier this month, *The New York Times* [published an article](#) about Pace Gallery’s plan to offer a series of “experiential art centers”

(EACs for short) will provide visitors with aesthetic experiences based on the merger of art and technology. Called “[Superblue](#)”, the EACs will “enable the simultaneous presentation of multiple large-scale and interactive works, offering visitors unparalleled opportunities to be transported to an array of new worlds.” The idea, according to Superblue’s website, was in response “to the rapidly growing public interest in experiential art and the needs of artists working outside the realm of object-based practices.”

The concept of Superblue – getting away from traditional *objets d’art* by providing art lovers with an experience, not a commodity – has a long history. Starting in the early 1960s, hundreds of artists, often working in collaboration with professional engineers and scientists, expressed a growing enthusiasm for experimenting and working with some of the era’s most complex technologies. Advocates argued that these collaborative experiments allowed artists to explore new aesthetic possibilities that technologies – often unavailable or unaffordable – such as lasers, microprocessors, and computers afforded, rewiring, literally and figuratively the work of making art itself.

Taken together, these efforts reshaped public perceptions of both technology and art. This was no slow burn but an aesthetic explosion catalyzed by money, media exposure, and the creative energies of engineers and artists alike. For some participants, it was a short, tumultuous affair. For others, these interactions left indelible marks on the rest of their professional lives. This, in fact, is the subject of [my new book, \*Making Art Work\*](#).

The practice of combining art with technology to create immersive multi-media environments was central to the practice of [Pulsa](#), a collective of seven young men associated with Yale University in the late 1960s. Pulsa started coming together in the fall of 1966 when David Rumsey, a recent Yale graduate and film maker, rented a loft in New Haven and met Michael Cain and Patrick Clancy, two graduate students in the painting department of Yale’s School of Art and Architecture, and Bill Duesing, a Yale alum who had studied photography and architecture.

Over the winter months, the four men experimented with a haphazardly assembled ensemble of electronic and audio gear. For example, for general lighting, they decided to replace many of their incandescent lights, which provided illuminated point sources, to fluorescent bulbs which generated broader fields of light. Abrupt flashes of white strobed light contrasted with the more subtle and

cool fluorescent illumination. The group's lighting experiments was complemented with audio output from a "electronic music generator" which friends and other visitors to the loft space could experience for as long as they wanted to stay. "After the first half hour," art critic Lucy Lippard wrote in 1968, "it became increasingly difficult to separate oneself from the environment."



Above: One of Pulsa's early "immersive art installations," c. 1967.

In the spring of 1967, three more men joined the group. Bill Crosby had been making light and sound pieces in New York while Paul Fuge was a Yale psychology undergraduate and photographer. Rounding out the septet was Peter Kindlmann, a Vienna-born research associate at Yale who had earned his Ph.D. for research in atomic physics. Seeking to improve to hardware which the group could access, Fuge and Kindlmann designed a hybrid digital/analog device which could electronically generate sounds (this was the era of tremendous experimentation with music synthesizers by people such as Robert Moog and Donald Buchla) and connect to the group's programmed light systems.

Eventually, the group's individual members decided to remain as anonymous possible with each member referring to himself as Pulsa. Consensus, with technical specialists treated on equal terms with artists, was at the core of the group's creative process. "A product of collective intelligence," Pulsa wrote in 1968, "unified through systematic implementation, the resultant art form is public." Collectively created, Pulsa art environments were intended to be shared likewise as the group contrasted itself in opposition to the traditional museum-gallery complex which were, it said, "elitist, patrician, artificial places." Rather than making fetishized "grand possessions," Pulsa produced an aesthetic sensory experience that left

nothing to own. “Our art’s an experience,” it explained, “and after it’s over, it’s over.” And the meaning of that experience would be dynamic, coming from its occurrence, rather than static existence.

In October 1968, Pulsa had the opportunity to put its principles into practice with its first major public art installation. For twenty evenings, Pulsa “turned on” a four acre pond in Boston with a complex but inconspicuous array of underwater strobe lights and loudspeakers placed at the water level sequenced to produce a complementary visual-audio display. Each “piece” began at sunset, to take advantage of the changing light conditions, and, as it became darker, the lights from Pulsa’s equipment was supplemented by illumination from passing cars and nearby buildings. “It’s like God is talking to us through electronics,” said one young man. Flashes of light and sound skipped around the pond like so many stones creating a rhythms which were “pervasive but elusive, entirely non-relational.” The result, one critic described, was a “successful blend of electronics and nature in an urban environment,” dazzling yet “completely unostentatious.”



Above: An image of Pulsa’s 1968 installation at Boston’s Public Garden.

However, like all of Pulsa’s projects, the few extant photographs of light-sound show in Boston are unsatisfactory in capturing what the experience must have been like. Even if one were to deploy the tools of media archaeology and reconstruct one of Pulsa’s installations, the ambient conditions and surroundings, as well as the aesthetic sensibility and expectations of the observers, would make our impressions of such a work radically different from what people experienced in 1968.

As it developed its contemplative sensory-stimulating light-and-sound environments, Pulsa was keen to differentiate itself from other artists and artists' groups that also worked with similar media. "It is unlike 'multi-media'," they wrote in 1968, "in that it is unified and abstract." At the same time, they saw their work as distinct from the psychedelic light shows – "phantasmagoric," they said – that accompanied bands like the Grateful Dead. Their work, one critic said, was "sober, measured, and devoid of trickiness" (an accomplishment, it should be noted, accompanied by Pulsa's considerable ingestion of various hallucinogenic drugs.)

The group scored some considerable notoriety during its rather brief and ephemeral career. The February 1, 1970 issue of *Vogue* contained a series of photographs, composed by Irving Penn, showcasing the new cohort of artists, actors, and gallery owners who were refashioning the cultural landscape (like much art writing from this period, it was assumed that the East Coast of the US was where all the action was). Penn depicted the collective almost as teen heartthrobs – seven young men, most bearded, gazing directly at his camera with shades of brooding tempered by a distinct sense of purpose.



Pulsa, 1970, as captured by photographer Irving Penn for *Vogue* magazine.

Pulsa's collective approach to art making expended to their living arrangements. Group members shared a large house with their wives and girlfriends, called Harmony Ranch, which became, in keeping with the era's back-to-the-land ethos that many young people joined, a sort of commune. Unfortunately, as happened with many such arrangements, factions developed as members of the groups pursued

other interests and goals. By 1973 – following a successful installation at MoMA, several other works, almost universal praise from the art critics, and residencies at the California Institute of the Arts –Pulsa’s experimental approach to making art came to an end.

All that remained were the reviews, a few home videos, and photographs.

Pulsa’s career as an art collective reminds us that “art,” “science,” and “technology” are not static categories. Rather they are evolving cultural enterprises. Ultimately this is about how engineers, scientists and artists presented their expertise and creativity. One way they did this in the past was by wiring and re-wiring art work and works of art. Whether in 1970 or now, what is produced is imbued with meaning, politics, and creativity, each with the potential to provoke strong emotions. Likewise art and technology each has the capacity to surprise us and show us something new about the world.

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